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DEPARTMENT FOR PA, NEA/ARN, INR/IC/CD, INR/R/MR:STHIBEAULT AND
JMCCARTER, VOA NEWS CA, NEA/PPD:CBOURGEOIS, AZAIBACK, AND
AFERNANDEZ, IIP/G/NEA-SA MDAVIDSON
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SUBJECT: Syria/Iraq, Syria/Israel, Syria/Ecuador, Rice Visit, Iraq,
Lebanon, Somalia (1/17)

1. Summary: For a third consecutive day the Syrian press continued to report extensively on Iraqi President Talabani's visit to Syria. Headlines reported that President Asad and Talabani held a closed meeting on Jan. 16, during which they reviewed ways to develop relations between the two countries in all fields. They also reviewed the results of meetings between Syrian and Iraqi officials to develop bilateral relations. Talks focused on the best means to achieve Iraqi national reconciliation, based on the unity of Iraq -- land and people -- and its independence and territorial integrity. President Talabani also met on Jan. 16 with VP Shara; Assistant VP Mohammed Nassif and Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Faisal Miqdad also attended.

Papers also featured an official statement by the Syrian Foreign Ministry denying a report published by Israeli newspaper Haaretz on Tuesday Jan. 16 about secret contacts between Syria and Israel. The source, answering a question by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), stressed that such information is "categorically unfounded and baseless."

On Syrian-Ecuadorian relations, papers reported that newly inaugurated President Rafael Vicente Correa Delgado received Information Minister Mohsen Bilal on Jan. 16. President Delgado hailed Syria's stances and important role in the Middle East, pointing to the joint goals and interests connecting the Arab and South American nations.

End of summary.

2. Selected Headlines:

"President Asad and Iraqi President Talabani review development of bilateral relations and achievement of Iraqi national reconciliation. The two Presidents stress the importance of Iraq's national unity and sovereignty" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 1/17)

"Syrian Foreign Ministry: News reports on contacts with Israel are categorically unfounded and baseless" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 1/17)

"Ecuador's President Correa Delgado receives Information Minister

Bilal: Syria's role in the Middle East is very important. Bilal: The meeting was very warm" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 1/17)

"Sudanese envoy heads to Beirut soon. Lebanese workers stage a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Commerce. Popular rejection of the reform paper" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 1/17)

"Israeli Chief of Staff Dan Halutz resigns as a result of Israel's defeat in Lebanon" (Government-owned Tishreen, 1/17)

"Four US soldiers killed in Mosel. More than 200 Iraqis killed and injured in explosions at al-Mustansrieh University" (Government-owned Tishreen, 1/17)

"A second US aircraft carrier heads to the Gulf. Russian defensive missiles to Iran. Ivanov: No sanctions against Tehran" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 1/17)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"From Heart to Heart"

Omar Jaftali, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, commented (1/17) "Perhaps what we heard from Jalal Talabani yesterday is the best proof that Syria's position was, and still is, appreciated by the Iraqi brothers. Although he passionately expressed his love for Syria and said he is heavily indebted to it, Talabani undoubtedly reflected satisfaction with Syrian policy and eagerness to build once again the best reciprocal relations to serve the two countries and fraternal peoples....

"Syria has all along been saying that it wants everything good for Iraq and stressing the need for a timetable for the withdrawal of the foreign forces from Iraq, as this would bring stability to the country. Syria is pained by the shedding of every drop of Iraqi blood. It is very concerned with this fraternal people and interested in Iraq's unity and stability and the success of the political process and national reconciliation in the country.

"On this fraternal and pan-Arab basis, Syria believes that the solution to the problem in Iraq must be political and come from within Iraq. Syria is ready to help the Iraqis achieve national reconciliation, as Walid al-Mu'allim said yesterday. This is the only debt that the Iraqis owe Syria and the constant Syrian demand from the Iraqi brothers. Nothing would delight Syrians more than seeing the crisis of Iraq resolved and a new page in Iraq's history turned within the process of Iraq's return to the Arab fold."

"A Hotbed of Tension"

Ali Qasim, a commentator in government-owned Al-Thawra, said (1/17): "US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visits to the region have become a source of real concern, as she devotes her efforts to activating hotbeds of tension in the region rather than advancing the peace process....

"Whenever Palestinians come close to agreement on a national unity government, Rice comes to bring the situation back to point zero, or even below point zero....

"Rice comes also to incite countries of the region one against the other and divide them into moderates and extremists. This keeps the region in a state of tension...."

"Only for Listening"

Ghazi al-Dada, a columnist in government-owned Tishreen, said

(1/17): "Condoleezza Rice, who came to the region with an empty diplomatic bag and only to listen to the parties, as she said, made it clear that the United States will continue to isolate HAMAS and the Palestinian government even though she knows very well that this means isolating and punishing the entire Palestinian people, the majority of whom elected HAMAS to the government democratically....

"Rice did not hide the fact that her country is supporting one Palestinian team against another to stoke strife among the Palestinians....

"Perhaps the only, or at least the most important, objective behind Rice's visit, is to muster support for Bush's new strategy in Iraq, although this objective was wrapped by the phrase 'I came only to listen.' The US Administration does only the things that serve its interests and the interests of Israel and their common plans in the region. Any thing else is not worth thinking about...."

"Washington Has to Bear Consequences of its Acts"

Hamed Abu-Sa'id, a columnist in government-owned Tishrin, wrote (1/17): "The joy of Washington and Addis Ababa after their joint and swift military victory over the Islamic Courts forces in Somalia has not been completed....[01]

"The reported attacks suggest that the Somali national resistance has begun its field action against the Ethiopian-American presence, while the Islamic Courts are reorganizing themselves to liberate

their country, supported by all those who oppose the American presence....

"The war might extend to neighboring countries....
On the pretext of fighting terrorism, the United States ignited the conflict in the Horn of Africa to change the balances of power there and control oil sources and roads in the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf countries, and Africa. It, therefore, has to bear the consequences of this mad escalation. The next days might hold many surprises for Americans and Ethiopians."

Corbin

[01]This says that the joy is not completed. Don't you mean that the victory hasn't been completed?